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## The England of G.K. Chesterton<sup>1</sup>

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Julia Stapleton is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Durham, UK. Her research interests lie in British intellectual history during the twentieth century. She has just completed a book on Sir Arthur Bryant (*Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Lanham, Md., Lexington Books, 2005), who was Chesterton's successor as the author of the column, 'Our Notebook', in the *Illustrated London News*.

Chesterton's view of the English nation has long been the despair of representatives of Left-Liberal Britain. This is because it is embedded in the notion of (for Chesterton) a long-suffering but (for his critics) a benighted "secret people", those who have "not spoken yet" in the words of his famous poem of 1907.<sup>2</sup> As such, the English are a perpetual threat to the "modernising" forces of the state, which they silently yet menacingly resist. Chesterton's English vision is thus condemned as a bastion of reaction – and a xenophobic one at that – an obstacle to the development of a truly popular national consciousness along the lines of Scotland and Wales in the post-British age.<sup>3</sup> However, this verdict serves more to obscure than illuminate the basis and contours of Chesterton's conception of English national identity, and the patriotic ideal with which it was closely linked. For a better understanding it is necessary to return to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century context in which his ideas developed and which gave them their sharp polemical edge. In this article I will attempt to draw out a coherent narrative of "England" in Chesterton's writings, one that I hope is the richer and more defensible for historical analysis.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I will suggest that Chesterton's attachment to England was far from narrow, insular, chauvinistic, and even militarist<sup>5</sup> – as some of his critics have claimed, despite the anti-semitism with which it became badly tainted (a subject to which I shall return). Indeed, part of his motivation as a patriot was to scotch the myth of English exceptionalism that had gained ground in the nineteenth century, not least through Whig history; he especially wanted to dismiss the various conceptions of cultural, religious and class superiority with which the myth of

English “difference” was imbued. For Chesterton insisted that English nationhood was simply a variant of a common European genus, however idiosyncratic.

One obvious entry into the late-nineteenth century world that Chesterton inhabited is provided by Robert Colls in his recent, magisterial book, *Identity of England*. Colls well succeeds in highlighting the idea of a “national corporate” that the middle classes embraced from the mid to the late-nineteenth century. Imbued with a new sense of *national* responsibility in line with their political ascendancy, they attempted to fashion an England anew out of the qualities of the common people. This mirrored their commitment to social and economic reform, eschewing the discipline of the market which they had championed previously. As Colls well points out, much of the cultural work of redefining the English nation in music, literature, folk-lore and the like reflected middle class tastes and prejudices.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he gives the impression that the search for “authentic” nationhood in this period was purely a function of the sifting of popular culture by *middle class* cultural enthusiasts, a popular culture conceived largely in terms of *working class* culture. This enthusiastic embrace of England as “national-corporate” was to prove a defining moment, both English and British, in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> But I would argue that Colls unduly narrows the range of the social spectrum from which the outlines of the “common people” were drawn. For Chesterton, who was a key figure in this movement, ancient English ideals and loyalties had been perpetuated by the comfortable middle class from which he hailed, as well as the working class. However, he regarded Englishness as gravely imperilled in both cases by new pressures. In the case of the working class, English national identity was threatened by the labourer’s loss of independent livelihood under the regime of industrial capitalism; also the interference in what personal liberty remained, consequent upon the new zeal for social reform targetted at the working class home. (He reminds me here of a pioneer economic historian in Britain, and contemporary of Chesterton, George Unwin. Like Chesterton, Unwin was an admirer of Dickens. He had also known poverty first-hand in his native Stockport. But he

regarded middle class philanthropy as concealing “an unconscious impertinence”. According to R.H. Tawney, Unwin felt that “his people were too good to be the prey of philanthropists”.<sup>8)</sup>

In middle class spheres things were different. There, Englishness was threatened by the condescension of its “aristocratic”, literary and aesthetic branch as the modernist revolt against convention in art and society took hold. It was above all the “superciliousness” of this part of the middle class against which Chesterton rebelled. For example, as he wrote in the socialist periodical, *The New Age*, in 1908, the contempt of “advanced” thinkers and writers such as H.G. Wells for the pub culture of the working class could never be taken seriously. This was because it was accompanied by equal derision for the Victorian middle class, derision that was quite without foundation. He parodied this middle class *de haut en bas* against itself thus:

“The aesthete attached to the Smart Set always said that because our tables were mahogany, our heads were mahogany. The journalistic duchess always said that our Sunday dinners were dull gluttony; or our conventions cowardice. Now all this I *know* to be nonsense. I *know* that in my grandfather’s house there was real hospitality in the heavy meals, real goodwill in pompous birthday speeches.”<sup>9</sup>

Now while Chesterton’s middle class sympathies were distinctly out of place in *The New Age*, they were nevertheless axiomatic to his long association with the *Illustrated London News* (hereafter, *ILN*), as the author of the column, “Our Notebook”. He maintained this link with the weekly journal from 1905 until his death in 1936. Outwardly, this connection is something of a puzzle. Why would Chesterton, a notorious “Little Englander”, have contracted to write for a leading chronicle of imperial events and personalities, both at home and abroad? Few Chesterton scholars have given his connection with the *ILN* the attention it deserves. They are content instead to dismiss it as simply a regular source of much-needed income which nonetheless significantly cramped his style.<sup>10</sup> But at the very least, there is no indication that Chesterton was forced to toe an editorial line in the *ILN*, as he was required to do at the *Daily News* before his departure in 1913. Arthur Bryant recounted a meeting with Frances Chesterton shortly after her

husband's death in which she informed Bryant that never, in all the thirty-one years of Chesterton's association with the *ILN*, had he received a directive from Ingram. Although he was required to refrain from *party* political controversy, he could express the most unorthodox views about politics and religion, and did so. Intriguingly, he never to his knowledge met the editor, (Sir) Bruce Ingram; although on several occasions he handed his contribution to Ingram personally at the *ILN* office, the self-effacing Ingram did not disclose his identity.<sup>11</sup> Chesterton's good relations with Ingram are apparent in the dedication to Ingram of his volume of essays, *Come to Think of it* in 1930, a volume which marked his "Silver Jubilee" as a contributor.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Chesterton's willingness to defend the middle class *outside* the confines of the *ILN* – as in the case of *The New Age* above – suggests that he was not simply keeping up appearances for the sake of his livelihood. Indeed, I believe that the *ILN* provides an important clue to the genesis of Chesterton's English attachments; also the tight links he drew between England and the cultural milieu into which he was born; and finally, his strong and enduring interest in the character of the age in which he lived, which Sheridan Gilley has remarked upon recently.<sup>13</sup> These issues are illuminated by the column Chesterton wrote to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the journal in 1912. He expressed his good fortune in growing up in a household in which the contents of the *ILN* were eagerly discussed over breakfast or dinner, and the back volumes carefully preserved in bound volumes. And it struck him that the present generation (in 1912, that is) lacked the intimacy which he – and his generation – had enjoyed with the *immediate* past, courtesy of the *ILN*. (Perhaps he was referring to the fragmentation of illustrated news consequent upon the breakdown of the *ILN*'s monopoly in the late-nineteenth century, and the loss of a unified, national narrative that accompanied it, one that achieved a circulation of 200,000 in its mid-Victorian prime.<sup>14</sup>) The consequences of this loss of contact with the immediate past were all too painfully evident: "self-deception" and "bluff" on the part of politicians and publicists alike. For Chesterton there was a direct parallel to be drawn here with the waning of (local) patriotism as "humanity" in the abstract made ever deeper impressions on

the modern citizen; the more “cultured” individuals grew as their knowledge of a remote past increased, the more ignorant they became of the immediate link between that past and the present.

Chesterton, of course, along with Arthur Quiller-Couch and George Saintsbury led the protest against the first of several waves of anti-Victorian reaction in the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> His stand against the break between present and immediate past has to be seen in this particular light. But the people to whom he rallied were significant not as ancestors *per se*, even Victorian ancestors, but as Englishness personified. He would have regarded his *ILN* readers and correspondents in remote parts of the empire in particular as vital remnants of an England that was fading from public view. They were rapidly becoming outcasts of a society in the throes of *denationalisation*; to his mind they certainly represented the “noblest” aspect of Imperialism, and he had the highest regard for them.<sup>16</sup> If we remain with Chesterton’s pride in his own background a little further, some of the values he associated with Englishness become clearer. For he never ceased to praise his elders in the family firm of estate agents, Chesterton and Sons, for what he called in his *Autobiography* their “sleepy sanity”. Like the wider class to which they belonged, he believed, they despised “flashy finance” and the social ambition that underlay it; and for all their imperviousness to the suffering of those less well off than themselves, they had the virtue of being moved more by their hobbies than their business. In this, wrote Chesterton, they were “extraordinarily English”. Whereas the American businessman put all his art into his salesmanship, “the old fashioned Englishman, like my father, sold houses for a living, but filled his own house with his life”.<sup>17</sup> But did the previous generation of Chestertons have any sense of themselves as English? Chesterton insisted that they did. Even if it was largely unspoken, his forbears, and their forbears in turn “believed as a solid and most sacred reality that there was a thing called England and a sentiment of patriotism which ought to be felt towards it”. But of what he contemptuously termed in the *Daily News* of 1904 the “*fin de siècle* pedantries about Celts, Teutons and Latins”, his ancestors, and – he presumed – those of his readers, cared nothing.<sup>18</sup>

The distortion of national consciousness by racial categories under foreign, specifically German influences was, for Chesterton, symptomatic of the fragmentation of the middle class and its consequent loss of national identity and purpose. He wrote in 1909 of the “tragedy of England” as its “old” and influential middle class had gone off in search of one panacea after another – the “orchid” of the “Smart Set” Imperialists or the “sunflower” of the Simple Life aesthetes.<sup>19</sup> The once forceful public role of the middle class – as in Dr. Johnson’s era – had been eclipsed by a governing class composed of a small and wealthy clique, united in its cynicism about party politics which it nonetheless manipulated to its own ends.<sup>20</sup> Against the backdrop of the corruption of British politics as the sale of honours and other political scandals erupted, Chesterton was greatly preoccupied with the question of who, or what is England, and who, or what is it not. Political morale had sunk so low in Britain in the years before the First World War that he singled out as the (real) “People of England” the “innumerable millions of cabmen, navvies, dustmen, and crossing-sweepers”; these were the “secret people” of his celebrated poem. “If ever they begin to talk”, he wrote in one of his *ILN* columns around this time “there will be fun”. He pitted them against the class immediately above them, the class of “Citizens”, as he called it in mock admiration. This comprised members of the lower middle classes and upper part of the working class. The “Citizens” represented the forces of social idealism whose energies were spent in debating political and religious questions which were largely frivolous and irrelevant.<sup>21</sup>

The People of England, then, were the class who had been left untouched by the sharp, plutocratic turn of British politics, the only class in whom – taken as a whole – the “spirit” of England remained pure and undefiled. They were buttressed by the honest toilers in the far-flung imperial vineyard and what remained of the solid, unassuming, “national” middle-class at home, from which these Imperial labourers ultimately hailed.<sup>22</sup> The corruption of England in high places was for Chesterton of course, not a process that was unique to his own times; to his mind, it had been set in train by the Reformation. This was something he insisted upon well before his

conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1922, although it clearly reflected the early influence of Belloc. He fleshed out this historical perspective in his *A Short History of England* in 1917. There he argued that the Reformation had transformed the English aristocracy into a land-grabbing, exploitative elite, characterised more by ambition for their descendants than piety towards their less refined ancestors.<sup>23</sup> Their appetite for power and wealth had been curbed only – again - by the more responsible sections of the middle class, exemplified in Sir Thomas More. But the example of More only serves to underline how, for Chesterton, the long-term betrayal of the English nation had gone hand in hand with its secularisation from the Reformation onwards. The new learning of the Renaissance had redounded less to the advantage of popular education than to an exclusive “club of aesthetics” – the scourge of his own time.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, Chesterton wrote that More jumped ship as soon as he realised that the movement against medievalism was hardening into a religious tyranny far more dangerous than the old at its worst. It was the threat to England, the England that More loved, as much as to Catholicism that underlined his defiance of the king; indeed the two were inseparable in Chesterton’s eyes.<sup>25</sup>

Here Chesterton rescued More from the condemnation of Victorian historians – J.A. Froude, especially. Froude was one of the main architects of the myth of English exceptionalism, indicting More on account of his complicity in the suppression of (Protestant) heresy as Chancellor of England.<sup>26</sup> According to Chesterton, More “had no more doubt about these poisonous doctrines than about poisonous drugs. He felt as a man would feel struggling with the growing power of gangsters and gunmen in Chicago”.<sup>27</sup> In the triumph of Henry, England was not only cut off from Europe but cut off from England.<sup>28</sup> This episode certainly cast the darkest shadow across the history of the “Secret People” – in the poem of that title, at least. As the depredations of the “King’s Servants” took hold and as the relatively benign rule of the French monarchs was swept away, the oblivion of the English people was sealed. But cultural death did not follow, even if political death did. Condemned to retreat in upon themselves, the shared identity of the English was apparent in literature, poetry and humour above all else. Chesterton



sought to explain his nation thus to an ever-perplexed foreign audience in 1932, in an essay for the British Council. He emphasised how “purely patriotic” the English were as a result of their unhappy history. Indeed, they were “possibly excessively and narrowly patriotic”, to the point at which patriotism had become a religion, or more accurately, a substitute for a lost religion.<sup>29</sup> For Chesterton, this was epitomised in Kipling’s reference to Westminster Abbey in his poem, *The Native-Born*, where he toasted

“the hush of the dread high altar,  
Where the Abbey makes us We”.<sup>30</sup>

How perplexing, argued Chesterton, would the pre-Reformation English buried in the Abbey have found these lines: Chaucer would have regarded the Abbey as a place in which his dust *was sanctified*, not a place which his dust *sanctified*.<sup>31</sup>

The reclusive nature of English patriotism that gave it this religious quality was evident in the absence of decent, literary songs that reflected the high degree of national pride, such as would inspire the “singing” and “marching” nations. Most significantly for Chesterton, the “real” nation was totally divorced from the “official” nation. What was said in the nation’s name was singularly unrepresentative, the reason being that in Britain, “the organs of the State are very seldom the really organic organs of the people”<sup>32</sup> One seriously wonders whether, for Chesterton, it could ever be otherwise, especially given the tension between the discourses of citizenship and patriotism in Britain in Chesterton’s time, and the advantage enjoyed by the former as a result of elite patronage.<sup>33</sup> This was despite his recognition that, disempowered, the English people were vulnerable to an elite which, for several centuries, had more readily identified with the state as a vehicle for its own ends. For one thing he feared that the “instinct for rebellion” among his compatriots was too much at the mercy of “ungovernable passion”. This, at least, was the impression conveyed by the numerous letters he received from his readers, passion that spelt “obscurity”, though it was the true voice of “sanity” for all that.<sup>34</sup> While he remarked in 1907 that his main motive in supporting Home Rule for Ireland was to get Home Rule for England, he

was not implying that England might become self-governing too; he meant that Home Rule for Ireland would eliminate the threat of Ireland conquering England (as, he believed, was the fate of all imperial nations in relation to the races they subjected) and misruling England through the gross misunderstanding that was apparent in all Irish-English relations.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, for Chesterton, the vitality of English nationhood lay in its hidden nature. Such a view was certainly very much in keeping with his Liberal and Christian view that the deepest recesses of the human soul – which included, quite plausibly, the national soul in England, too – should be sealed off from the state.<sup>36</sup> It was certainly on account of the historic distance of the English nation from the British state that Chesterton opposed conscription in the First World War, for all his vociferous defence of Britain's cause in the war. The average English workman, he maintained, “does not care about the State. Though he cares a great deal about the country”.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, he condemned militarism, and the insistent call to arms by lobbies such as the Navy League in Edwardian Britain. These were the product of the narrowest type of patriotic imagination.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, from Chesterton's perspective the strength of English patriotism was *spiritual* rather than *political*, “centripetal” rather than “centrifugal”.<sup>39</sup> It was therefore best deployed in opposition. This represented a return to the militant eighteenth-century roots of English patriotism, the Tory tradition of rebellion associated with Bolingbroke, Johnson, Swift and Goldsmith against the full might of the Whig oligarchy that had fatally undermined England's “national” character.<sup>40</sup> He pitted this tradition against the shameless “incumbent” patriots of his own time – Alfred Milner, Joseph Chamberlain, and Lord Roseberry. What he most wanted to do was to raise the profile of an England and an Englishness that were becoming dangerously recessive. It was not just that the English people were being rapidly deracinated by the “servile state”, in conjunction with the discipline of the State; they were being slowly effaced in national culture by alien, “class” ideals such as the “gentleman”. The gentleman was another symptom of the betrayal of democracy by the “advanced” sector of the middle classes. Chesterton was mortified by the character of the English gentleman in Stevenson's novel, *The*

*Wrecker*, whose taste in everything from alcohol (Scottish whisky rather than English beer) to furniture and art was cosmopolitan in the extreme.<sup>41</sup> Neither could he abide the “stiff upper lip” mentality that often accompanied the essentially class ideal of the gentleman. This was responsible for the image of the English abroad as a cold, superior race, which could not be further from the truth as Chesterton saw it. He applauded W.S. Gilbert for ridiculing the “false patriotism” of his compatriots at a time when England was in its prime: national greatness ought to make an Englishman humble rather than proud, Chesterton wrote in 1904, apropos the famous lines in *H.M.S. Pinafore*.<sup>42</sup>

So how narrow and oppressive was the England of Chesterton’s imagination? Insular it clearly was not, for all its “Little England” diatribes against imperialism. For Chesterton located England firmly within the European family of nations, rooted in Christendom. “I fully accept”, he wrote in his *History of England*, “the truth of Mr. Kipling’s question, ‘What can they know of England who only England know?’ and merely differ from the view that they will best broaden their minds by the study of Wagga-Wagga and Timbuctoo”.<sup>43</sup> But if in its formal outlines England was not an “exceptional” nation, neither in its substantive detail was it “exemplary” either: its culture and politics were too muddled, ramshackle, and intimately bound up with the character and everyday interaction of its people to provide a model for others. These were qualities that for Chesterton were all part of England’s charm, and central to his fondness for his country, unlike those of “practicality” and “efficiency” which in any case he thought were much exaggerated. “We have nothing which can be taught to the nations”, he wrote in 1904. “We have nothing at all but common sense; and it is the very essence of common sense that it cannot be taught to anybody”.<sup>44</sup> Once again, this was in flagrant defiance of the Whig myth, and its underlying “civilizational perspective”. When conjoined with a Toryism that progressively disavowed its earlier sectarianism, this perspective became integral to the “English ideology” of the nineteenth century: the idea that England was both exceptional (particular) but also exemplary (universal).<sup>45</sup>

Homogeneous the English nation was not either, certainly not in early-twentieth century terms, even if it would appear distinctly uniform by the very different standards of the multicultural nation a century later. For Chesterton celebrated the sheer diversity of types within its “common and containing atmosphere”, from the Mayfair butler to the Bermondsey publican and even the English Quaker – who was impervious to national distinctions. None of these types could be found elsewhere, he asserted proudly.<sup>46</sup> It is true that he ranked oriental cultures and religions lower than that of Christianity in the scale of civilisation. But he recognised that they lacked some of the besetting sins of western life, notably “humbug”, and “self-deception” concerning their social and political systems, especially. He developed this argument in an article written towards the end of his life in which he emphasised the “simplicity” rather than the “mystery” of Asia. He was particularly keen to correct this misunderstanding because “every sham religion, every shabby perversion, every blackguard secret society, has claimed to feed on the strange fruits of that garden of Asia.”<sup>47</sup> This reiterated his longstanding fear, as we have seen, that imperial nations were fated to be conquered by those they had once subdued, not least due to the gullibility of their ruling class, one of the central motifs of his novel, *The Flying Inn*.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in his opinion, not the least reason why Christianity and Islam were permanently at loggerheads was the imperviousness of Islam to place, earthly loyalties and boundaries as expressions of the divine.<sup>49</sup> This is a point on which he has been echoed recently by Roger Scruton.<sup>50</sup>

Chesterton’s anti-semitism is less easy to deny or excuse. It seems to have eaten away at him, particularly after the Marconi affair in 1912. There are passages in his early writings in which he praised the Jewish people to high heaven. For example, in reviewing for *The Speaker* in 1901, he condemned anti-semitism as the inevitable outcome of barring Jews from all callings except commerce, and was particularly censorious of Continental anti-semitism, “which can find no answer to Jewish triumphs, except to flourish tauntingly the image of a martyred Jew upon an Aryan gibbet”.<sup>51</sup> But the negative impact – as he saw it – of prominent Jewish figures in English

national life led to a dramatic loss of perspective on Chesterton's part. There was Disraeli, who had fawned over the English aristocracy whom Chesterton loathed.<sup>52</sup> There was Sir Alfred Beit, selling England's soul to the imperialist devil.<sup>53</sup> There were Sir Rufus Isaacs and Sir Herbert Samuel, ensuring that British government descended still further into the twentieth-century mire of scandal and corruption (although Chesterton indignantly denied that his motivation in the Marconi case was anti-semitic<sup>54</sup>). And there was Lord Melchett – Sir Alfred Mond, the founder of ICI – who became a byword for the 'Servile State' of monopoly capitalism in Chesterton's later journalism.<sup>55</sup> For Chesterton, all these bad influences could be attributed to a basic Jewish indifference towards the nations in which Jews settled, due to the absence of a Jewish country left behind. Not that he was impressed by Jewish M.P.s who supported the Aliens Act in 1905 which turned away from British shores their less prosperous brethren; Chesterton poured scorn on their would-be "Englishness", taking sides in this instance with those "wretched people of [their] own race who make from necessity the voyage that [they have] made from greed."<sup>56</sup>

However, Chesterton's anti-semitism should be considered as one of many strands of his conception of English nationhood, not its defining feature. Nor was anti-semitism exclusive to the Radical Right's imagining of England in Chesterton's era, or indeed in the present.<sup>57</sup> I would argue instead that Chesterton gave voice to a distinctive sense of cultural identity and belonging defined in non-racial and non-denominational terms, even if his anti-semitism soiled his ideal. The "problem" with Englishness when he first made its acquaintance was precisely the opposite: narrowly conceived as Anglo-Saxon, on the one hand, and Protestant, worse still, Puritan, on the other. England had outgrown its Christian, specifically Catholic roots, to Chesterton's great regret, roots which were now all but severed from the mainstream of national life. This is something he actively attempted to reverse. But he was catholic rather than Catholic in his conception of Englishness; and he exulted in the decay of the deadening influence of Puritanism in the nineteenth century, and what he conceived as the slow revival of "medieval energy and character" in both Scotland and England, although sadly not Ireland, the heavy burden under

which George Bernard Shaw was condemned to labour.<sup>58</sup> Chesterton's conception of the English nation was also far less drawn in narrow class terms than that of his current opponents on the Left; as we have seen, it embraced working class and middle class alike. To that extent it could not simply be a vehicle for a strident "popular" will, driving forward a progressive agenda in abstraction from wider patriotic ties. Again, the chasm between Chesterton and Shaw is instructive here, rooted as it was in what Chesterton conceived as Shaw's addiction to remorseless logic, his imperviousness to sentiment and symbolism. This made his much-vaunted Humanitarianism entirely devoid of sympathy. Shaw was a Republican rather than a patriot, one who spoke the language of Citizenship rather than Brotherhood.<sup>59</sup> Nor could Chesterton's England ever be detached from *history* and *particularity*; it is therefore the polar opposite of attempts by the historian, David Starkey, to develop a new, "post-nationalist", English identity. This would be premised upon institutional, economic, and cultural "success" in a global world that is all in the present and future rather than the past (despite – one might say - its echoes of an old Protestant tale).<sup>60</sup> Starkey's ideal of England as merely a local and more successful instance of "global" practices mirrors that of cultural organisations such as English Heritage, anxious to fly in the face of the indelibly English associations of the sites of historical interest in their charge in the interests of multiculturalism.<sup>61</sup> A specific, "fixed" English national identity in these quarters is now regarded as a liability, a source of division rather than cohesion in society.

It may be that Chesterton's England is hopelessly dated, too much bound up with controversies about Little England versus Empire that have long since passed, and religious, political and historiographical mindsets that have ceased to compel.<sup>62</sup> However, it was based on a certain sensibility and perception that have evaded the more shallow and opportunistic constructions of Englishness in recent times, anxious to appear sophisticated and "non-exclusive". Chesterton attempted to capture, account for, and extol the relative distinctiveness of English nationhood, without which the depths of patriotic attachment and loyalty in England seemed inconceivable. At the same time he stood firm against the corruption of English

patriotism by *hubris*, on the one hand, and its exploitation by class and government, on the other. Indeed, conceived thus English national identity is a powerful populist weapon in a culture that has become increasingly hostile to populism. Large parts of Chesterton's characterisation of England have been echoed long after his death by the historian, Arthur Bryant,<sup>63</sup> and, more recently, the writer and critic, Peter Ackroyd.<sup>64</sup> I do not think that the prosaic ideals of England that have been propagated recently will make quite the same impact or endure so well as those – especially Chesterton's – which defined the English nation a hundred years earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> For help in placing Chesterton in relation to the more recent literature on Englishness, I am especially grateful to Arthur Aughey. I am also grateful to Stephen Clark for commenting on an earlier version of this article. My thanks are due, too, to members of the British History, 1815-1945 Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, London, to which I gave a paper on Chesterton and England which formed the basis of this article. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of a British Academy Small Research Grant in making possible the research for this article.

<sup>2</sup> "The Secret People" was first published in *The Neolith*. It was re-published in *The Collected Poems of G.K. Chesterton* (Methuen: London, 1915).

<sup>3</sup> See the recent article by Patrick Wright, "Last Orders", *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 9 April 2005; a version of it has been published as "Last Orders for the English Aborigine", *Soundings*, 29 (Spring, 2005), pp. 21-34. Wright is a disciple of Tom Nairn, who used Chesterton's lines about the "secret people" of England as the basis of his case for a new, "democratic populism", intent upon achieving English political autonomy against the suffocating influence of (conservative) Britain: *The Break-Up of Britain* (New Left Books: London, 1977). However, Chesterton would have been unimpressed by Nairn's somewhat contradictory view that at the root of the "secrecy" of the English people is political and cultural "backwardness", and lack of a "mature" national consciousness like that of the French. Nor would he have been much convinced by Nairn's view that salvation lies in the European Union. The distrust of English nationalism – and the English people – by Nairn and his supporters is evident in Neal Ascherson's review of Nairn's subsequent book, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland*, in *The London Review of Books*, vol. 22, 17 February 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, this is possible only in so far as his sketchy outlines of his native country and fellow countrymen in a multitude of journalistic outlets across almost four decades permit. The task would have been made easier had Chesterton completed his book on "The Englishman" of which he claimed to have written half in 1924: see his column, "Our Notebook", *Illustrated London News* (hereafter *ILN*), 15 March 1924, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Apropos Chesterton's defence of Britain's role in the First World War, Margaret Canovan maintains that Chesterton's ideal of local patriotism "slides too easily into a defense of world war to be helpful. All it does, in the last resort, is cast a spurious glamour over the horror of the

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trenches”: *G.K. Chesterton: Radical Populist* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). This claim is based on assumptions of “moral equivalence” between Germany and the allied cause that Chesterton emphatically denied.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002), pp. 306-11.

<sup>7</sup> Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003); Peter Mandler, “The Consciousness of Modernity? Liberalism and the English National Character, 1870-1940”, in Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (eds.), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Berg: Oxford, 2001), pp. 119-44.

<sup>8</sup> R.H. Tawney, biographical memoir in *Studies in Economic History: The Collected Papers of George Unwin* (Macmillan: London, 1927), p. lxx. I have discussed Unwin’s work in “English Pluralism as Cultural Definition: The Social and Political Thought of George Unwin”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52:4 (1991), 665-684.

<sup>9</sup> Chesterton, “On Wells and a Glass of Beer”, *The New Age*, 25 January 1908, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> A.L. Maycock, *The Man Who Was Chesterton* (Dennis Dobson: London, 1963), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> “Our Notebook”, *ILN*, 11 May 1957, p. 758.

<sup>12</sup> Chesterton, *Come to Think of It: A Book of Essays* (Methuen: London, 1930).

<sup>13</sup> Sheridan Gilley, “Chesterton and the English Anti-Catholic Tradition”, *The Chesterton Review*, 30, nos. 3-4 (2004), p. 294.

<sup>14</sup> This figure was given by Bryant for the year 1856, in the course of celebrating the centenary of the *ILN* in his column for 16 May 1942, p. 567.

<sup>15</sup> On the anti-Victorian reaction in the twentieth century, see Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (eds.), *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *ILN*, 14 June 1913, p. 880.

<sup>17</sup> Chesterton, *An Autobiography* (1937; Fisher Press: Sevenoaks, 2000), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Chesterton, “The Delusion of Races”, *Daily News* (hereafter, *DN*), 26 November 1904, p. 6; and *ILN*, 21 April 1917, p. 450.

<sup>19</sup> Chesterton, “A Glimpse of My Country”, *Tremendous Trifles* (Methuen: London, 1909), pp. 236-7.

<sup>20</sup> Chesterton, “The Perils of Conferences”, *Daily News*, 26 November 1910.

<sup>21</sup> *ILN*, 6 November 1910, p. 816.



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- <sup>22</sup> On the “national” credentials of his ancestors, despite the “narrowness” of their political philosophy, see his tribute in *ILN*, 26 January 1907, p. 124.
- <sup>23</sup> Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917, new ed., 1924; Fisher Press: Sevenoaks, 1994), pp. 99-100.
- <sup>24</sup> Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, p.100.
- <sup>25</sup> Chesterton, “Thomas More”, in Maisie Ward (ed.), *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity from St. Bede to Newman* (Sheed & Ward: London, 1933), p. 212.
- <sup>26</sup> J.A. Froude, *History of England: From the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth*, 10 Vols., II (John W. Parker: London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1858), pp. 77-83.
- <sup>27</sup> Chesterton, “Thomas More”, p. 215.
- <sup>28</sup> Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, p. 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Chesterton, “The Shy-Bird”, in D. Collins (ed.), *A Handful of Authors* (Sheed & Ward: London, 1953), p. 206.
- <sup>30</sup> Rudyard Kipling, “The Native-Born,” *The Seven Seas* (Methuen: London, 1896), 53.
- <sup>31</sup> Chesterton, “The Religious Aspect of Westminster Abbey” (undated) in *The Spice of Life* (Darwen Finlayson: Beaconsfield, 1964), p. 111.
- <sup>32</sup> Chesterton, “The Shy Bird”, p. 206.
- <sup>33</sup> I have explored this tension in J. Stapleton, “Citizenship Versus Patriotism in Twentieth-Century England”, *Historical Journal*, 48:1 (2005), pp. 151-78; On the *popular* nature of patriotism in England at the turn of the twentieth century and its varied expressions, see Paul Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture, c. 1890-1914”, *Past and Present*, 186 (February 2005), pp. 147-199.
- <sup>34</sup> Chesterton, *ILN*, 31 August 1907, p. 296.
- <sup>35</sup> Chesterton, “Mr. Shaw’s Escape”, *DN*, 20 July 1907, p. 6.
- <sup>36</sup> For Chesterton’s critique of Wells’ all-seeing state as offending two of the Rights of Man: “darkness and secrecy”, see “Wells and Liberty”, review of Wells’ “A Modern Utopia”, *The Speaker*, 1 July 1905, pp.325-26.
- <sup>37</sup> Chesterton, *ILN*, 12 June 1915, p. 749.
- <sup>38</sup> Chesterton, “The Monomaniac”, *DN*, 1 June 1907, p. 6.
- <sup>39</sup> J.H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain, 1900-1940* (Routledge: London, 1986), p. 111.
- <sup>40</sup> See the very searching essay that Chesterton wrote in *The London Mercury*, “Milton and Merry England”, in *Fancies Versus Fads* (Methuen: London, 1923), pp. 229-30, and the significance he

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attached to it in the (for him, rare) introduction. The essay is Chesterton's attempt to combat the demons that still haunted him from the *fin de siècle* movement - the idea that art could excel in abstraction from life in general and religion in particular, as evident in the poetry of Milton. But he moved in to defend the anti-Puritan poets among the Cavaliers, whose poetry may not have reached the high literary plane of Milton, but whose religious emotions as more in touch with popular, i.e. *English* emotions were unexampled. Their spirit lived on, he believed, in the Jacobite tradition of Johnson *et al.*

<sup>41</sup> Chesterton, *ILN*, 7 November 1931, p. 716; R.L. Stevenson, *The Wrecker* (1904; Heinemann: London, 1924).

<sup>42</sup> Chesterton, "The Genius of Gilbert", reprinted from *The Nation*, 1908, in *A Handful of Authors*, p. 128.

<sup>43</sup> Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Chesterton, "The Secret of England", *DN*, 20 February 1904, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> See Arthur Aughey, "The Challenges to English Identity", in Robert Hazell (ed.), *The English Question* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2006), pp. 46-7.

<sup>46</sup> Chesterton, *ILN*, 15 March 1924, p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> Chesterton, "On the Simplicity of Asia", in *All I Survey* (Methuen: London, 1933), p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> Chesterton, *The Flying Inn* (Methuen: London, 1914).

<sup>49</sup> Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, pp. 45-7.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Continuum: London, 2002), pp. 92-104.

<sup>51</sup> Chesterton, "Jews Old and New", *The Speaker*, 2 March 1901, p. 601.

<sup>52</sup> Chesterton, "Dizzy and his Tales", review of B. Langdon Davies (ed.), "Young England", by Benjamin Disraeli, *DN*, 30 December 1904, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Chesterton, "Two Tales from Oxford", *DN*, 3 December 1904, p. 6; "The Romance of Wealth", 21 June 1906.

<sup>54</sup> Chesterton, "Nonsense and 'The New Statesman'", *The Daily Herald*, 29 November 1913, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Chesterton, "Lord Meltchett", *G.K.'s Weekly*, Vol. 12, no. 303, 3 January 1931, p. 261.

<sup>56</sup> Chesterton, *ILN*, 20 March 1909, p. 408. Four out of twelve Jewish M.P.s voted for the Aliens Bill.

<sup>57</sup> The English vision of one of Chesterton's antagonists on the Left, Edward Carpenter, was equally suffused with anti-semitism: Vincent Geoghegan, "Edward Carpenter's England revisited", *History of Political Thought*, 24 (2003), pp. 509-27. Also, Patrick Wright's article in footnote 3 above was written during the 2005 election campaign in Britain, when the

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Conservative Party leader, Michael Howard, was subjected to anti-semitic attacks by the Labour Party.

<sup>58</sup> Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (John Lane: London, 1909). p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, pp. 76-77, 86-87.

<sup>60</sup> David Starkey, millenium on-line debate organized by *The Sunday Times* entitled "By 2050 England will have recreated itself: visionary, multi-ethnic, free. Is this farewell to the bulldog breed", <http://www.chronicle-future.co.uk/debate2transcript.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See David Lovibond, "A Very Un-English Heritage", *The Salisbury Review*, 24:2 (Winter 2005), pp. 12-14.

<sup>62</sup> For example, one of the architects of the 'new' British history, J.G.A. Pocock has discounted recent attempts to ground English identity anew in pre-Reformation Catholicism, a reference perhaps to Edwin Jones's, *The English Nation: The Great Myth* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), a book with echoes of Chesterton's view of England and Europe: see J.G.A. Pocock, "Gaberlunzie's Return", *New Left Review* (second series), 5 (2000), 41-52. Pocock's case for "archipelagic" history and identity is less powerful, six years on, with England (and perhaps Northern Ireland, too) arguably a loser in the process of devolution.

<sup>63</sup> For Chesterton's influence on Bryant, see Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth Century Britain* (Lexington Books, Lanham, Md., 2005), pp. 8-9, 42-43, 64, 73. Chesterton would have been pleased with Bryant as his successor at the *ILN*, given his positive review of the second volume of Bryant's biography of Pepys, *Samuel Pepys: The Years of Peril*, in "And so to Bed", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 23 January 1936, reprinted in *The Spice of Life*.

<sup>64</sup> Ackroyd's "love of Chesterton", together with his – and his sense of England's – "Catholic sensibility" came across in his interview with Christopher Howe, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 September 2002. His Chestertonian conception of Englishness as rooted in artistic styles and sensibility rather than political nationalism, and above all focused on "place" and the past is apparent in his recent book, *Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination* (Chatto & Windus: London, 2002).